

## Chapter 5

In the opening chapters of the letter, I tried to demonstrate that there is no part of humankind, Jewish or otherwise, that has lived in the way that God, our creator, intended for us when he made us. I have also argued that this has certain consequences. Instead of embracing Life, we have been embraced by Death. I have also shown that God, acting through King Jesus, has addressed the issue and now offers a way for us to get back on track.

In the next section of the letter, I pick up some of the issues I have already mentioned and work out some of the details.

### **Verses 1–11 The argument so far and its implications**

In these verses I spell out some of the implications of the things I have been arguing up to this point. I'm summing things up before moving on to the next stage of the discussion. I have argued that the followers of Jesus are 'justified by faith'. This is shorthand for saying that God will find in our favour at the final judgement on the basis of our trust in what God has done through King Jesus. This, in turn, is to say that God treats us as though we had always lived in the way that God originally intended humans to live. As I shall show, our being treated like this really does mean that we have indeed, albeit falteringly, begun to live in the way God intended.

1. Remember that words like 'justification' and 'wrath' are law court language. Wrath is the thing that motivates the judge to act. If the court finds in your favour, wrath is not exercised against you. To put this another way, there are no issues between you and the judge; you are at peace. Those who follow King Jesus will be vindicated at the last judgement and therefore have peace with God. They have nothing to fear for God will bring no charge against them.<sup>1</sup> Another way to look at this is through another metaphor – I was never afraid to mix them. Think of a king who expects loyalty from his subjects. If they rebel against him, then they're at war with him. If they subsequently offer their allegiance, then they are at peace. Those who follow King Jesus have given their allegiance to God. This is the category of humans who are justified, that is, who will be vindicated at the judgement. There is peace between them and God.

2. This means we are welcome in God's presence now. One of the big issues in the ancient world was about who could get access to the powerful. If you could get to them, then you could ask for their help. King Jesus has made sure that his followers have access to God. It's like you've got a ticket to the Houses of Parliament or to the White House that says 'Access All Areas'. One consequence of this is that we anticipate experiencing the glory of God. Remember that speaking of the glory of God is often shorthand for the goal that God originally had for humanity. We have begun the journey that will lead us there. None of this is anything that is earned or deserved. We receive it as a gift. It is a matter of grace. So, there are three stages in my thought about this, all of which only happens because of the generosity of God. First, we are justified which means that God will find in our favour at the last judgement. Next, as those who will be vindicated, we have access to God now. Finally, we hope to live more and more fully in the way that God intended. The process of salvation has past, present and future dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> I meant, of course, that this peace with God was something that we have. I recognise that some versions of the letter imply that this is something that that I am encouraging the Roman Christians to have. That wasn't really the point I was trying to make.

Actually, there's a little more to it than that. I was trying to imply a reference to the temple in Jerusalem. There the high priest has access to the presence of God in the holy of holies just once a year. Those who follow Jesus enjoy this access in prayer and in worship in the here and now.

3. So, while all of this brings us joy, it is something we experience in the midst of considerable suffering. The followers of King Jesus can experience persecution and they are not immune to the pains and losses that can afflict anyone. However, we are aware that this suffering can have a purpose; it teaches us how to endure.

4. And when we learn to endure, we become stronger people. You sometimes hear people say, 'Anything that doesn't kill me, makes me stronger,' and it's that sort of idea that I'm getting at here. We develop character and that, in its turn, helps us to trust in God's future, to become people characterised by a sense of hope.

5. And if your hope is in God, then you will not be disappointed. After all, as I've been saying almost from the very start of the letter, one of the things the gospel shows us is that God can be trusted to keep his promises. But there's more to it than that. You see, following Jesus is not an intellectual exercise; it is a relationship, and it is highly experiential. As I shall outline later, the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. An important part of his work is that God's love is poured into our hearts. This is the foundation of everything. Knowing we are loved is the basis on which we build our lives. All this is attempting to show that following Jesus is something that profoundly affects the way we live. I shall build on this idea later in the letter. For now, it is important to get the idea that God starts off by treating us as though we were living in the way he always intended and then, through his action in our lives, starts enabling us to indeed live in that way. God accepts us just as we are, but then wants to move us on to become the people he longs for us to be.

6. I'm afraid there's another picture in this verse. This one is built round the idea of health. Basically, we were sick and there was nothing we could do about it. You know what it's like when you're really ill. You're helpless. And you can easily get worse if nobody's there to help you. You need someone to rescue you. King Jesus rescued us by giving up his life for us. We were in Sin. We habitually lived in ways which did not conform to the way God, our maker, had intended. However, at the time of God's choosing, Jesus died and was faithful to the point of death, for the sake of those who were not living in the way God intended.

7. You could put brackets around this bit of the argument. There were stories that circulated in the ancient world about people who were so lovable that others were willing to give their lives for them. So, I could conceive of the idea that a person might give their life for someone really good, even if this would be pretty unusual. You might have seen a film called *Saving Private Ryan*. In the film a group of soldiers is ordered to go to absurd lengths to rescue a young soldier who is caught behind enemy lines. The group all end up giving their lives in this mission. At the end, the leader of the group speaks his dying words to the young man who has been saved and tells him to 'earn this'. In the film's final scene, set many years later, we learn that these words have haunted the saved man. He wonders if his life has been good enough to 'earn' what has been done for him and asks his wife if he has been a good man. As I say in the letter, there are people who might be prepared to die for someone good.

8. However, God's love is more extraordinary than any such illustration; King Jesus' act of obedience unto death happened while we were sick, while we were God's enemies, while we were under God's judgement, while we lived in the realm of Sin, while we were failing to live as God intended. We were not good and had no prospect of being so. Yet King Jesus was willing to die for us.

9. So, we can be absolutely sure that this obedience to the point of death has brought us to a place where, going back to the law court imagery, God the judge will find in our favour and so we shall not face judgement.

10. I change the image slightly at this point. I move away from the law court picture and go back to the one I introduced in the first verse, the one based on our having become enemies of God and so needing to find peace with him. I picture God and humanity as being enemies. We made ourselves enemies of God by refusing to live in the ways that God originally intended. This put us at odds with his original goals for the whole of creation. We ended up working against his purposes. Yet though we were his enemies, God acted through the obedience to death of his son King Jesus to bring about reconciliation. More than that, the life of the risen and ascended King Jesus, will save us; that is, will enable us to live as friends of God, as those whose lives conform to the purposes God had for humanity when he first created us. I shall explore later how the risen life of King Jesus continues to have an impact on his people. For now, I'll just say that he does this through the continuing impact of his teaching and example, through his intercession for us and through the work of his Spirit within us.

11. The outcome is that we rejoice in this reconciliation. Where once I might have boasted in my own identity or achievements, thinking that these were significant in God's purposes, I now boast only in what God has done through King Jesus.

The courtroom imagery of the last part of the argument remains but is supplemented here by the language of war and enmity. The idea is that the human rejection of God's way of being human, a story told or summed up in the story of Adam, makes us rebels – we have made ourselves the enemies of our Creator. God has acted through King Jesus to bring about peace with his rebel enemies. The whole image is one of reconciliation. This makes a natural link to the discussion of Adam that now follows.

### **Verses 12–21 Jesus or Adam – Two ways to be human**

You will have registered that the story from the opening chapters of the Bible has been in the background of a lot of the discussion so far. It is time to make it much more explicit. The story of Adam and Eve explains that humans took the wrong path. Their disobedience took us off track. I have suggested ways in which the story of Abraham begins the long journey of turning things around. Now I shall explain how in and through King Jesus, God has made the decisive move to get us back on track.

Sin, the wrong way to be human (see chapter 1), came into the world through the actions of the first humans – the Bible calls them Adam and Eve – and they were given the primal mandate and the first commandment. Adam and Eve represent all of us; their story is our story; we live with the consequences of their action because we are all born into human

societies and cultural practices that have developed as a result of the decisions they made. There was no escape until King Jesus created one.

The first consequence of human disobedience – of failing to be human as God intended – was that death became a reality. This became the common human experience because everyone was in this situation. However, it is important to understand that physical death is just a symptom of a deeper and far more serious issue. It is a sign of the real or deeper Death, that is, of being excluded from the life of the age to come, excluded from the glory that God promised to humans when he gave them the primal mandate. In summary, pulling together my understanding of Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, their mandate was, ‘to be God’s agent in the created order, fill the earth, subdue it, be crowned with glory and honour’. That was the track we abandoned and it’s the track that God’s action through King Jesus puts us back onto.

The other thing to bear in mind as you read the next section is that I regard Adam and King Jesus as being the prototypes of the two different ways to be human. Adam is the prototype of disobedience and hence is associated with Sin and Death. King Jesus is the prototype for obedience and hence offers Life as God intended, and so glory. In this argument, I compare the two prototypes. We will see that there are some points where things run in parallel and others where they don’t.

In the next few verses, I tell the story of humanity from Adam to King Jesus. In outline it goes like this. Adam broke the commandment God gave him and so ceased to live in the way God had intended. Instead, he and all his descendants ended up in the way of living called Sin, the outcome of which is Death. All his descendants till the time of Moses, who received the Instruction, live this way. However, since the Instruction had not yet been given, they did not know that they were in that condition. Nevertheless, the consequences of that condition were apparent, the most significant consequence being death. When the Instruction came, the group of humans who received it – that is, the Jews – learned what it meant to transgress. As a result, the presence of Sin was more obvious to them.

12. Sin, that is, living in ways that do not conform to God’s original purpose for us, came into the world through Adam. His story sums up our rejection of our creator. The consequence of his disobedience was that death entered the creation. And since all humans have, inevitably, been influenced by Adam’s action and its consequences, we have all lived, one way or another, in ways which do not conform to God’s original purposes, which means that we all sin, which in turn means that we are subject to its consequence which is Death. Let me stress that I do not simply mean physical death. I mean Death in the sense of being excluded from the things that God originally intended for humans. Physical death is a pointer to this greater Death. Similarly, when I speak of Life, I don’t simply mean our current physical life, I mean the kind of Life God originally planned for humanity.

13. I can see that I have argued my point here quite densely and it might be better to unpack it. If you know the story of Adam and Eve, you will know that they disobeyed God. There was a commandment, and they knowingly broke it. This put them and all their descendants into the realm I call ‘Sin’. That is, they lived in ways other than those that God had originally intended. So now, all humans find themselves in this category.

Now, I know that I have suggested a link between the Instruction and transgression and Sin, but we need to recall that there had been a primal commandment – don’t eat the fruit

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – long before the Instruction was ever written down. So, all humans lived in the realm of Sin, that is to say that, because of Adam's transgression, they were not living in the way God intended. They were in that condition before the Instruction came along. But, where there is no awareness of the Instruction, people are not actually conscious of that Sin. After all, how would they know? Most humans were unaware of the primal commandment and of the Instruction that God later gave. The upshot of all this is that all of humanity is in Sin. However, this was not necessarily apparent to any of them because none of them, at this point, had the Instruction.

14. Nevertheless, humans lived with the consequences of this Sin, the most obvious of which is Death. Indeed, Death was pretty much in charge from the beginning until the time of Moses, when the Instruction was given (I do not mean to imply that it stopped being in charge at that point. In fact, it was at this point that its rule became obvious, at least to those who were given the Instruction). This applied to everyone whether or not they knowingly transgressed as Adam did. Most humans were in Sin, even though they were not necessarily aware that they were breaking any specific rules. In all of this, the figure of Adam works as a kind of polar opposite to King Jesus, the one God was planning to send to address the issues.

15. I have set up the idea that Adam and Jesus are related to one another. In some respects, they are like one another and in other senses they are very different. The governing idea is that, in response to the primal disobedience of Adam, God offers the obedience to the point of death of King Jesus. In some ways the two are parallel to one another but in other ways they are not. My first point is that the act of grace offered by King Jesus is unlike Adam's transgression. This is because Adam's act of disobedience resulted in Death for many while God's grace through King Jesus has brought Life to many. One is an act of disobedience, it abandoned God's way of being human and resulted in Death. The other is an act of obedience by one who fully embraced God's way of being human and it resulted in Life.

In these verses, I sometimes say that what King Jesus accomplished is for 'many' and sometimes that it is for 'all'. I can see that this may lead to some confusion. I didn't intend 'all' to be literal but to underline the contrast between the actions and their consequences.

16. In addition, Jesus' action is not like Adam's in that the act of disobedience meant we stood under God's judgement; it brought the consequence of Death for those who lived in ways other than the one God intended. God's action through the obedience to death of King Jesus happened after very many acts of disobedience by other people, and led to our being vindicated, that is, escaping judgement. The two ways of life lead to different results, one condemnation and Death, the other vindication and Life.

17. Look at it this way, the primal disobedience led to the reign of Death, but God's act of faithfulness through King Jesus offers us the opportunity to reign in Life. Notice the use of the word 'reign'. This is my reference back to the primal mandate that God gave to humans as well as to the language of Psalm 8. Those who follow King Jesus are to live in the way God originally intended for humanity; they are to be *crowned* with glory.

18. Now I go back to the picture of a law court. One act of disobedience, that is the transgression of Adam, leads all to judgement and Death, and one act of faithfulness to God's way of being human leads to vindication and Life.

19. One act of disobedience by Adam affected all humanity and made them live in ways other than God's intended way and thus live under Sin; in contrast, one act of obedience brings many to Life in the way God originally intended.

20. So, one of the effects of the Instruction was that it served to increase the number of transgressions. It intensified the issues associated with Adam. It's obvious when you stop to think about it; those who did not have any instructions did not have any lines to cross and so did not transgress – though they still lived in Sin. Of course, increased transgression brought increased awareness of Sin, but in this very place, that is, among the people – Israel – where the Instruction was known, grace was given in abundance. In other words, issues had to come to a head among the people who knew the Instruction because that was where Sin was most apparent. It was not apparent there because they were worse than anyone else. In fact, they were almost certainly considerably better. It was apparent there because knowledge of the Instruction meant there were lots of transgressions which revealed and magnified the underlying issue of which transgression is the symptom; Sin, that is, living in ways which do not conform to God's original purposes for humans. Remember, Sin is the disease, its symptom is transgression and its outcome is Death.

21. So, we have a story of two people who promote two different powers as king. After the disobedience of Adam, Sin was king in the time of Death. Now, after the obedience of King Jesus, grace is king because he allows people to be treated as though they live as God originally intended and this leads to Life in its fullest sense. All this only happens because of King Jesus.

The argument here has been about understanding Adam and Jesus as polar opposites. Both are representative figures. They represent the two ways to be human. Adam, the one who committed the primal act of disobedience, stands for all the ways of living that do not conform with God's original intention. They all lead to Death and to *exclusion* from the Life of the age to come. On the other hand, King Jesus is the one who lived in full obedience to God's way of being human even though it meant his death. This leads to *participation* in the Life of the age to come.

God has placed before us a choice. We can either belong in the group represented by Adam or in the one headed by Jesus. We reflect either the disobedience of the first or the obedience of the second. We experience either the Death associated with one or the Life offered by the other.

The place where the contrast between them comes into clearest focus is among the Jewish people. This is not because they are worse than anyone else, quite the opposite. It is because they possessed the Instruction. It was therefore among them that transgressions took place, and these transgressions revealed the underlying issue of Sin, that is, living in ways God did not intend for his creation. So, it was there that the issue of Sin needed to be addressed.

So, I have explained that, through King Jesus, God has made it possible for humans to be saved, that is, to live as God originally intended and so to enjoy all the promised

consequences of such Life. I have also implied that historical Israel, the people who had the Instruction, must be significant in the story. Clearly, the place of Israel and the role of the Instruction are issues that I am going to have to treat in more detail later. Right now, I must deal with a possible objection to my argument.